

## **REITH LECTURES 1979: The African Condition**

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### **Lecture 3: A Clash of Cultures**

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Africa is still in a state of transition. In the field of scientific explanation Africans are having to change their minds about a lot of things. What causes rain, for example? We are beginning to be converted to the proposition that droughts are not caused by a surplus of twin babies born in a particular year. What causes disease? Whenever I have indigestion I am still puzzled as to whether it might not have been caused by the evil eye of either somebody hungry or somebody greedy who caught a glimpse of my jaws chewing away. And yet I do find relief when I turn to Alka-Seltzer. Clearly, Africa is not the nearest in culture to the Western world, yet the continent has been experiencing in this century perhaps the fastest pace of Westernisation anywhere in the non- Western world. What are the causes of this paradox? What are the implications?

To understand the full ramifications it would be useful to relate the process of Westernisation in Africa to the different functions of culture in societies generally. First, culture provides lenses of perception, a way of looking at reality, a world view. In what way has the Western impact modified the African view of the world? In assessing the relationship between culture and perception it may be worth our while reminding ourselves of Thomas Kuhn's study of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn distinguishes between normal science, signifying the continuities of scientific thought and scientific revolution, which comes when the whole view of looking at reality undergoes fundamental and relatively speedy change. Copernicus caused a revolution in how we viewed the universe. He caused a shift in what Kuhn would call 'paradigm'. Charles Darwin, a little nearer our day, was another scientific revolutionary in this sense. Other scientific revolutions will, of course, include the discoveries of figures like Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein. All these were major shifts in scientific paradigms. They are also part of the history of the scientific civilisation which the Western world later came to transmit to African societies.

Although Kuhn's theory was intended almost entirely to deal with scientific revolutions, what I want to raise here is the issue of cultural revolutions in a sense much wider than that intended by Mao's China in the 1960s. The Cultural Revolution in Africa is more fundamental as the continent capitulates to the aggressive conquering force of Western civilisation. The power of Western paradigms in Africa has increased because of a basic alliance between Western science and Western Christianity as transmitted in missionary schools in Africa. Religion is one way of explaining reality; science is another way, though not necessarily incompatible. The carriers of Christianity into Africa were also the carriers of Western secular education. The missionaries built schools not simply to teach the Catechism and the Bible, but also to teach mathematics, biology, and one or more European language.

Much more so than in colonial India or occupied Egypt the colonial powers in Africa south of the Sahara gave the missionaries virtually a free rein outside strongly Islamic areas. So, whereas colonised Indians and colonised Egyptians had to contend mainly with Western secular and scientific paradigms, colonised black Africans had to contend both with these secular paradigms, and with a highly institutionalised Christian missionary effort at the same time. This combined Western onslaught on the African mind, linking the sacred with the secular, allying science with religion, created a particularly strong cultural revolution in Africa, not least because traditional African cultures themselves did not differentiate between secular knowledge and sacred wisdom.

The gods of African traditional religions were often gods of bravery. The God of Christianity urged you to 'turn the other cheek'. The gods of Africa rewarded the warriors; the God of Christianity canonised the martyrs. In the end, the feminine virtues of Christianity—the softer ideals of love, gentleness, tenderness, forgiveness and patience—were invoked in Africa in a manner which made the 'pacification' of Africans easier and their submission to the imperial order speedier. The harder warrior values of Africa—courage, endurance, manhood, and even purposeful ruthlessness—were discouraged.

We had to wait until the last third of the 20th century to witness in Africa the re-masculation of Christianity, a readiness to invoke the macho values of militant combat in defence of justice. The World Council of Churches and the All-Africa Conference of Churches have had debates about the legitimacy of subsidising liberation movements in Southern Africa, ostensibly as a contribution to their non-military needs, though in reality it is impossible to isolate the non-military from the military in the budgets of the movements. After undermining so drastically the warrior tradition in Africa in the first 60 years of the 20th century some Christian missions are now seeking an alliance with the warrior tradition in the liberation of Southern Africa. The so-called feminine virtues of humility, forgiveness, and 'turning the other cheek' are being challenged by the doctrine of 'using the other fist'. Christianity in Africa is undergoing the agony of change from a theology of submission to a theology of liberation.

This brings us to the second major function of culture in society—culture as a standard of evaluation, a criterion of right and wrong, vice and virtue, ugly and beautiful. Attitudes to sexuality and sex relations are one illustration of what is going on. One perennial issue in Africa is the question of polygamy. Earlier this year the Kenyan legislature once again debated the issue of whether the marriage laws of the country should be standardised, and whether polygamy should either be abolished or made subject to the permission of the first wife or the prior wives. The militant machismo of Kenyan parliamentarians was staggeringly clear in the debates in the National Assembly.

What is clear is that the institution itself, though basically pre-Christian, has shown remarkable resilience even in an Africa that has been greatly influenced by Christianity. Many Africans end up having one Christian wife and more than one wife under a different traditional arrangement. When some years ago Sierra Leone's ambassador to the United Kingdom married the late President Nkrumah's former South African girlfriend—and then defended himself by saying that his prior wife at

home had been married through traditional custom, the embarrassment was too great against the limelight of the Western press. The government of Sierra Leone, although fully aware that such things were perfectly normal in Africa, felt compelled to recall its ambassador to the United Kingdom. Since it was disapproved of by the West it was regarded as too embarrassing in absolute terms.

Then there is the sentence of monogamy that Christianity has passed on humankind, identifying love, perhaps too closely, with reciprocal sexual monopoly between two individuals. The Christian distrust of sexuality in Africa included a ban by Christian missions on certain dances in schools, dances which were regarded as too sensuous. And there was also a ban on certain African songs which were regarded as too suggestive.

Now there is a post-Christian world of values as well. There is the greater liberalisation of sexual behaviour in the Western world. There is complete or almost complete legitimisation of premarital sex all over Western Europe and North America, except for small pockets of orthodoxy and traditionalism. For many African societies a transition to premarital sex is not necessarily post-Christian, but is partly a return to the pre-Christian, the pre-colonial. Post-Christian sexual morals in the West include easier divorce. For Africa that is also part of the pre-Christian picture, where marriage was a matter of negotiation and re-negotiation, and a woman could go back to her parents either temporarily or—in the last resort—permanently, if compatibility with the husband was elusive.

In the West the post-Christian sexual revolution includes the easing of restrictions on obscenity and pornography. In some African countries it is easier to find naked men going about their daily business in the villages than to find obscene peep-shows and naked models in commercialised sexual literature in the cities.

African countries still retain laws against homosexuality. That is one aspect of the post-Christian sexual revolution in the West which has yet to be imitated in Africa. Africans generally enjoy more heterosexual licence than Westerners, but they enjoy less homosexual permissiveness.

What is clear is that in morality as in law and aesthetics, Africa is in a cultural transition profoundly influencing its standards of evaluation. Parallel standards are competing with each other.

The third major area of function for cultures lies in motivation. Particularly important as a cultural factor is the balance between the pursuit of individual interests and the pursuit of collective welfare. In traditional African societies the scale was approximately like this. You were first motivated to acquire enough for your own basic needs and the needs of the immediate family. The second imperative was the pursuit of conditions to satisfy the basic needs of the wider family and society. The third imperative was the pursuit of personal advancement beyond basic needs. The fourth was the promotion of the welfare of the extended family and wider society beyond their collective needs.

Under the Western impact some reshuffling of the principles of behavioural motivation took place. The pursuit of basic needs still remains primary in a

Westernised African. But next in importance now tends to be the pursuit of self-advancement beyond basic needs. In other words, the basic needs of the wider clan are beginning to be subordinated to the imperative of personal advancement first. In economic terms this change of individual priorities has resulted in a much greater emphasis on the profit motive. Unless restrained by dictatorial government an increasingly large number of African entrepreneurs have climbed on the bandwagon of capitalist behaviour.

Again two systems of values are often interacting. In this case the profit motive is in competition with the prestige motive. The profit motive is partly borrowed from the West in its modern guise, but the prestige motive is part of the traditional heritage of seeking collective approval in the clan by sharing one's bounty and displaying one's cattle. African capitalism, by combining the search for profit with the desire for prestige, has combined in sharpening the acquisitive instinct alongside the urge to consume. Whenever possible the interest in loud and expensive cars, ostentatious dwellings, luxurious parties and entertainment has been a concurrent feature of the drive for greater wealth in Nigeria as in Kenya, in the Ivory Coast as in Zaire.

The fourth function of culture is as a medium of communication. The European languages are the most important cultural bequests that Africa has received from the Western world. Once again the impact of the languages on Africa has been deeper than it has been anywhere in formerly colonised Asia. The very identity of African countries is partly tied up with whether they speak English, French, Portuguese or some other imperial language. We never refer to 'English-speaking Asia' or to 'French-speaking Asia' the way we refer to 'Anglophone Africa' and 'francophone Africa'.

When they become independent the great majority of African countries south of the Sahara chose their imperial language as the national language. They chose their Members of Parliament from among those of their compatriots who spoke the now national language. They similarly chose their governments from the same tiny fraction of the population which was Westernised. Until now the first great leaders of Africa have been disproportionately from among these Westernised and semi-Westernised people. This includes African Marxist leaders. For an African to be sophisticated enough to read *Das Kapital* he must have not merely acknowledge of a European language, but an impressive command of that language. Even those Africans who are first exposed to Marxism by studying in the Soviet Union find their way to the Soviet Union initially through a Western European language. No Africans are ever admitted to Soviet universities direct from some village compound. It is because of these considerations that African Marxists are inevitably, and of necessity, products initially of Western education and Western linguistic competence.

This has, in fact, taken us into the fifth function of culture in society—culture as a basis of stratification. There is little doubt that Western culture has helped to redefine the pecking order in African societies. Instead of classes emerging from the question, 'Who owns what?' class formation now responds to the question, 'Who knows what?' The knowledge may indeed be merely literary, but the colonial impact certainly distorted reality, both in a Marxist materialist sense and in an African normative sense. The very process of acquiring aspects of the imperial culture came to open the doors first of influence, and later of affluence itself.

As for the role of culture in production and distribution, Western economic systems carry with them cultural implications. Consumption patterns change in the wake of canned fruit and a newly-assembled bicycle. New skills are transmitted through the activities of Western transnational corporations. The creation of new types of jobs in turn transforms the nature of individual ambition and occupational aspirations. The urban bias in African development induces migration from the rural areas to the urban centres, with further modifications in cultural patterns of life. Capitalism itself erodes aspects of African traditional fellowship and collective life. The money economy has created new ambitions of accumulation of surplus and the construction of commercial empires. A new juju has cast its spell, mesmerising the ambitious, titillating the greedy, spellbinding the acquisitive. The new juju is cold foreign exchange, the availability of convertible currency as a form of international power. It is important to say here that economic forces and processes of production are a fundamental aspect of Africa's assimilation, not only into the world economy, but also into Western culture.

Finally, we have the function of culture as a basis of identity. Culture helps to define the 'we' and 'they' in given situations. The three most basic levels of identity that the Western impact has deepened among Africans are the identity of 'tribe', as the different groups compete for scarce resources in new territories created by the West; the identity of the nation state as Africans go about calling themselves Nigerians or Kenyans as a result of boundaries created by the colonial power; and the identity of race, which has in part been a reaction to European chauvinism and arrogance towards non-white people in the last few centuries.

But in addition to these three levels of identity—tribal, national and racial—it is arguable that even the identity of an individual as a distinct personality has been deepened by the impact of Western liberal thought with its principles of individualism and personal accountability. It is arguable that Western forms of individualism emerged partly out of the impact of Christianity, especially the Protestant versions of it. Ideas of personal accountability before God, reinforced by individual choice between good and evil, contributed to the emerging forces of individualism in Africa. Alongside Christianity was Western liberalism, with its notions of 'one man, one vote' and its emphasis on the right to privacy and personal choice in matters ranging from the ballot to the boudoir. The migration from the countryside to the cities was also in part a transition from the constraints of collective village life to the relative permissiveness of urban life. The pursuit of personal profit has escalated in African economic systems, and this again is both a reflection and a reinforcement of the growing trend towards individualism.

Many aspects of life are changed as a result. To marry primarily for love rather than for the collective welfare of the family or clan is itself a case of individualism in matters of marriage. Monogamy is a slogan of 'one man, one wife'—echoing the electoral cry of 'one man, one vote'. Another force which has generated individualism consists of the rules of Western education and science. To get help in writing your essay at school could be a case of cheating; certainly copying from your friend in an examination is a great violation of the code of honour. One is judged in an examination as an individual. Scientific discoveries are carefully attributed to individuals like Darwin, Einstein, and smaller fry. Then there are the rules of Western art. Plagiarism can be a serious intellectual and artistic sin. Yet in Africa the oral

tradition is still collective wisdom. Oral literature is often a literature without authors—ballads and folk tales recited down the generations without specific attribution as to who first composed or invented them. Tunes from drums, flutes and xylophones cannot be traced to individual great composers of the past.

What emerges from all this is that the African has discovered himself as an individual, as a black man, as a citizen of a particular modern African country, and indeed as a resident within the African continent, partly because of his historical interaction with Western culture.

What I have been considering is the cultural penetration of the West into the souls of African people. It is intriguing now to see how the reverse is happening as the West gradually feels the cultural impact of the Third World. In fact, partly intrigued by the phenomenon of a Korean defiantly acting as a missionary in the heartland of the Western world, I have attempted to follow the activities of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church. Many American parents are incensed that their children have flocked to this movement. I can understand the feelings of parents who regard a religious leader as a rival. I am sure I would be similarly jealous of a religious leader who threatened my own rights as a parent in terms of the loyalty and fidelity of my children. I have three sons of my own. I happen to be an African, and I know that my sons would be similarly exposed to the blandishments of missionaries had I still been living in Africa. The only difference in Africa is that the missionaries would have been Western—belonging to such established denominations as Methodism and Catholicism. Is missionary activity in America by the Unification Church any different from missionary activity in Africa by Catholic, Methodist or Anglican Churches? Is the rigid discipline imposed by Reverend Moon any different from the rigid discipline imposed on African children by Christian disciplinarians in the villages of Zaire or Upper Volta?

In fact, as an African, I cannot help admiring Koreans for giving Americans a taste of their own medicine. I believe in counter-penetrating the citadels of power in the West. Economically, this is done when OPEC buys shares in major Western industries. Intellectually, this is partly achieved when teachers from the Third World begin to influence young Westerners in the same way Western teachers have for so long sought to mould the minds of young Africans and Asians. Religiously, counter-penetration is partly achieved when missionaries from Asia and Africa begin to preach and proselytise in Western countries. Reverend Moon, with all his faults, may be part of the vanguard.

The struggle against Western religious subculture and supremacy is likely to be slow. But interdependence is not merely an economic condition; it has also to become a cultural relationship. The Western world has to experience a shift in its ways of looking at reality, a shift in the direction of cultural humility, a readiness to be influenced by others and a willingness to help construct a new and more balanced international cultural order.